

## THE RETURN OF BERNARD LEWIS

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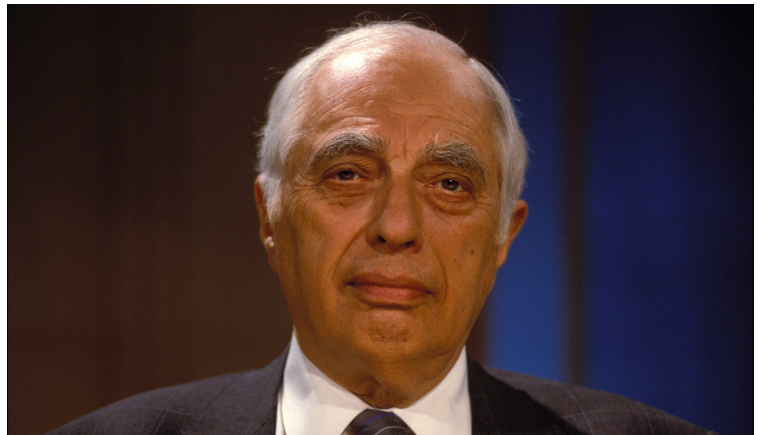
**Forty years ago, nobody foresaw the rise of radical Islam—except for the preeminent historian who both predicted and explained it, and much else besides.**

June 1, 2016 | Martin Kramer

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As the year 1976 opened, the Middle East hardly seemed poised for a great transformation. The shah of Iran remained firmly seated on his peacock throne. Off in Iraqi exile, an elderly Iranian cleric named Ayatollah Khomeini nursed his grievances in obscurity. Anwar Sadat, Egypt's confident president, had the country under his thumb; the Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoots languished in ineffectual opposition. In Saudi Arabia, a young man named Osama bin Laden finished his education in an elite high school, where he had worn a tie and blazer. Since the previous summer, Lebanon had been roiled by battles, according to Western reportage, between "leftists" and "rightists." A key player there was the Palestine Liberation Organization under Yasir Arafat, darling of the international left and champion of a "democratic, secular state" in Palestine.



*Bernard Lewis on French television in 1990.*  
Frederic REGLAIN/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images.

The role of Islam in politics? There wasn't any to speak of.

Imagine, then, the surprise of the readers of *Commentary* magazine when the January issue landed in their mailboxes bearing these words on the bright yellow cover: "The Return of

Islam.” The byline beneath that sensational headline did not belong to a roving journalist or a think-tank pundit but to Bernard Lewis, the eminent British historian of the Middle East, just recently transplanted to America. Thus did the West receive its very first warning that a new era was beginning in the Middle East—one that would produce a tide of revolution, assassination, and terrorism, conceived and executed explicitly in the name of Islam.

Another slogan, “The End of History,” would make its appearance with the demise of the cold war in the early 1990s; it has since come and gone. “The Return of Islam” is still very much with us. And so, too, is its author, who yesterday celebrated his one-hundredth birthday. For Lewis, the author of some 30 books and 200 articles, that [essay](#) has always stood out as a landmark in his own career. This is evident in the following passage in a brief [résumé](#) written by him in the early 2000s for Princeton University’s department of Near Eastern Studies, where he spent the latter part of his academic career:

During the last twenty years or so, I have become more and more concerned with the rise and spread of various extremist versions of militant Islam. My first publication on the subject was an article on “The Return of Islam,” published in *Commentary* magazine in January 1976. This was years before the Iranian revolution. I have since given many lectures and published many articles as well as several books on various aspects of this topic.

In this note, Lewis didn’t name those “many articles” and “several books,” although they had catapulted him from academic fame to genuine celebrity. Two of them bore gripping titles also identified with him: *What Went Wrong?* and *The Crisis of Islam*, two post-9/11 bestsellers. But it is by the early prophetic phrase “The Return of Islam” that he wished to be recognized, and it provides an essential entryway to any proper understanding of his immense achievements as a scholar, a writer for audiences both specialized and general, and a public intellectual of unmatched authority and influence.

Over Lewis’s long career—he published his first scholarly article in 1937—he has been the subject of innumerable profiles, all seeking to capture the essence of his astonishingly versatile performance. All of them fall short: there is always much more to say, and no one has the full breadth of competencies to say it. That is owing to what one such profile accurately [describes](#) as

the extraordinary range of his scholarship, his capacity to command the totality of Islamic and Middle Eastern history from Muhammad down to the present day. This is not merely a matter of erudition; rather, it reflects an almost unparalleled ability to fit things together into a detailed and comprehensive synthesis. In this regard, it is hard to imagine that Lewis will have any true successors.

Those words are not only a tribute to Lewis but a tacit admission that at present the field of Middle Eastern and Islamic studies cannot attract or nurture a genius of his caliber.

Depending on the date, one might have encountered Lewis in the 1930s as a young British prodigy and budding expert on extreme Shiite sects and medieval guilds; in the early 1940s as a British intelligence officer working in MI6 to win a world war in the Arab Middle East; or in later decades as a product and a pillar of the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London. He later gained renown as a pioneer researcher in the vast Ottoman archives in Istanbul; a social historian focused on Islam's underclasses, from slaves to Jews; a cold-war liberal and the leading authority on the Western-style modernization of Turkey; a sensitive translator of poetry and prose from Arabic, Hebrew, Persian, and Turkish; the world's most acclaimed interpreter of "Islam and the West"; the antagonist of the radical Palestinian apologist Edward Said in a great duel over "Orientalism"; the mentor to successive generations of students, many from the Middle East; a friend of Israel and its leaders, and an annual snowbird in Tel Aviv; a seer feted by the George W. Bush administration in the aftermath of 9/11; and a media-savvy interviewee and much-celebrated author of huge bestsellers.

And that long paragraph barely begins to inventory Lewis's diverse roles and monumental contributions. Even his own memoirs, *Notes on a Century* (2012), leave much virgin ground for any future biographer.

**Of all the many aspects of Lewis's vast oeuvre, the one that stands out now, when Islamic State, jihad, and caliphate fill headlines, is the one from early 1976, "The Return of Islam."**

On his centenary, opinions will surely differ on which aspect of Lewis's vast oeuvre deserves to be emphasized. To speak for myself, I first met Bernard (and now permit myself this intimacy) shortly after his arrival at Princeton, when I enrolled there in graduate studies in the fall of 1976. As his student, disciple, and friend for four decades now, I have read much if not most of his work, have had many occasions to discuss it with him at length, and would be hard put to name a book or article that isn't a useful prompt for a broader appreciation. Should one begin with his take on Jewish-Muslim relations in *Semites and Anti-Semites* (1986)? Or perhaps his view of his own field in "The State of Middle Eastern Studies" (1979)? Why not his virtuoso command of Muslim sources and his appreciation for the Muslim perspective in *The Muslim Discovery of Europe* (1982)? When he turned eighty, I edited a collected volume in Bernard's honor whose point of departure was a seemingly minor fourteen-page article, "The Pro-Islamic Jews" (1968).

The possibilities are endless. But of all the many points of departure, the one that stands out on this centennial of his birth—at a time when Islamic State, jihad, and caliphate fill headlines—is the one from early 1976, "The Return of Islam." Nearly all experts on the Middle East had failed to anticipate the likes of Ayatollah Khomeini and Osama bin Laden, and awoke, when they awoke, only to voice the firm opinion that Islamist revolution and terror had nothing to

do with Islam. Bernard was not only the first to alert the world to the possibility of Islamic upheavals; he demonstrated that they were not deviations at all, but a resumption of Islam's ancient feud with the West. Although he will be remembered, favorably or otherwise, for many things, for one he will never be forgotten: his all-too-accurate prognostication that our age would be defined by the return of Islam.

## **I. The Way Prepared**

In the background of this role lay Bernard's 40-year career as a student and teacher of Middle Eastern history at the University of London. He had closely investigated those long periods during which an expanding, intact Islam constituted both a religion and a civilization. In particular, he fixed upon Islam's conflict with Christendom and the West.

Islam the religion, he wrote, was "the chief contender with Christianity for the hearts of men," while Islam the civilization was both "the nearest neighbor and deadliest rival of European Christendom." Because Islam and Christianity were "sister religions"; because both civilizations shared the legacy of Mediterranean antiquity; and because both owed much to Jewish religious tradition and Hellenistic thought, each "recognized the other as its principal, indeed its only rival." Bernard described their bitter contention as a family feud over "an immense shared heritage," between two civilizations "divided by their resemblances far more than by their differences."

It would be hard to overestimate the significance of this insight. By the time Bernard wrote these lines, a cultural industry had developed around the notion that Muslims and Christians (as well as Jews) could be reconciled by emphasizing their commonalities. This would eventually develop into today's faddish concept of three "Abrahamic" faiths, a kind of prophet-sharing plan intended by its advocates to blunt the fact of mostly Muslim hostility by emphasizing how much Islam shares with Christianity (and Judaism) and downplaying the differences.

Bernard argued exactly the opposite. Yes, Islam regarded Christians (and Jews) as "people of the Book," and so showed tolerance to those who submitted to Islamic rule. But there could be no greater affront to Islam than the continued existence of an independent Christendom, precisely because of its declared prior claim to many of the same proofs of superiority as were claimed by its Islamic rival.

Indeed, not only were the two civilizations rivals; they were locked in "almost permanent conflict" from which there were no true respites. For well over a millennium, from the first Islamic conquests in the 7th century through the last Ottoman siege of Vienna in the 17th, Islam had been on the march. Later, Europe would launch "a counterattack into the lands of

Islam and establish European imperial domination in old Islamic territories.” For Bernard, this “ebb and flow of Muslim empire in Europe and of European empires in the land of Islam” was part of one “long and—alas—unfinished struggle.” No matter how much modern Westerners might wish to consign that struggle to the dustbin, Muslims would not oblige them—hence, the “alas.”

**“We shall be better able to understand” why the U.S. is hated, Lewis wrote, “if we view the present discontents of the Middle East not as a conflict between states or nations, but as a clash between civilizations.”**

Such, then, was the fundamental template of Bernard’s approach to Islam as religion and civilization. Already in a 1957 lecture he was asking why the United States, which at that time had “never annexed or occupied an inch of territory in the Middle East,” should be so resented there. “We shall be better able to understand this situation,” he answered, “if we view the present discontents of the Middle East not as a conflict between states or nations, but as a clash between civilizations.”

Some variety of this sentence would appear repeatedly in his work over the ensuing decades—most famously in a 1990 [article](#) for the *Atlantic Monthly* entitled “The Roots of Muslim Rage”:

It should by now be clear that we are facing a mood and a movement far transcending the level of issues and policies and the governments that pursue them. This is no less than a clash of civilizations—the perhaps irrational but surely historic reaction of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the worldwide expansion of both.

## **II. Islamism: The Latent Phase**

The Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington would later, with full acknowledgment, borrow the phrase “clash of civilizations” for the title of his famous 1993 *Foreign Affairs* essay and subsequent book. It was Huntington, not Lewis, who made “the clash of civilizations” his signature idea, arguing that Islam and the West were condemned to perpetual conflict. In his 2012 memoirs, Bernard would reassert paternity of the phrase in a chapter title, and he was right to do so: in large measure, both his scholarly and his general writings revolved around the theme of an expanding Islam in its glory days and an aggrieved Islam in our own days, admirable in many ways for its tenacity but always in rivalry and conflict with Christendom and the West.

And yet, in the actual Middle East of Bernard's first 60 years, Islam hadn't been much of a factor in politics. At his birth in 1916, as World War I raged, there was still an Islamic state—the Ottoman empire—nominally led by a caliph, ruling over Istanbul, Damascus, Jerusalem, and Baghdad, and engaged in an openly declared jihad against Britain, France, and Russia. But it was on its very last legs. A few years later, the empire would be gone, the caliphate abolished, and jihad discredited.

By 1938, when Bernard paid his first visit to the region, secular nationalism set the agenda. Atatürk's Westernizing reforms had transformed Turkey. The Pahlavi monarchy was attempting to do the same in Iran. In Cairo, Damascus, and Baghdad, all under British or French control, Western-educated Arabs inspired by European ideas of nationhood led movements against foreign rule.

Yes, there were Islamists of a sort, like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Off in the Arabian peninsula, the House of Saud had created its own unified state based on a puritan understanding of Islam. But in the palaces and the military barracks, the arenas of nationalist politics, Islam played hardly any role. In the 1950s, in a series of post-World War II revolutions, military officers seized power in many of the newly independent Arab states. Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser and the various iterations of the Arab Baath party banned Islam from politics altogether, and drove the Muslim Brotherhood underground or into exile.

**In the 1950s, most Western experts regarded the banishing of Islam from the Middle East public sphere as a solid and enduring event. Lewis concurred, though with reservations.**

The general run of Western experts at mid-20th-century regarded this banishing of Islam from the public sphere as not only a good thing, since it would facilitate modernization along Western lines, but as both solid and enduring. Bernard largely concurred, drawing particular encouragement from Turkey's Westernizing reform. *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (1961), still regarded by many as his most important book, documented and celebrated the evolution of the last great Islamic polity, the Ottoman empire, into the Republic of Turkey, a European-style nation-state and member of NATO. Here was proof that the civilizational divide could be bridged, so long as Muslims themselves did the crossing. Indeed, secular Turks warmly reciprocated Bernard's celebration of their project, lionizing him on visits and eventually conferring upon him the Atatürk International Peace Prize.

Bernard was also sympathetic to the parallel efforts of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi to institute a similar change in Iran—and found himself among those invited to attend the lavish 1971 bash at Persepolis celebrating 2,500 years of Iranian monarchy. Three years later, he described that event—where the Shah stood regally before the tomb of the ancient Persian emperor Cyrus and declared: “Oh mighty Cyrus, you may sleep in peace, for we are awake!”—



as a “skillful and purposive use of history.” It demonstrated, he wrote, “the transformation of the Persians from a religious community to a secular nation, with the core of their identity, the focus of their loyalty, no longer Islam but Iran.”

True, Bernard immediately added a caution: “The process [of transformation] is under way, but is not yet completed,” and thus required such “further help” as was exemplified in the shah’s grand proclamation of a national continuity stretching over two-and-half millennia. But Bernard’s phrasing, at once admiring and carefully hedged, did not begin to suggest that the process might actually be reversed altogether, and very soon, by an Islamic revolution.

By the time that revolution happened, however, he had already sounded the alarm.

### **III. Heralding the Return**

When Bernard’s article “The Return to Islam” appeared in 1976, the notion that Islamists might one day seize the Grand Mosque in Mecca, overthrow the monarchy in Iran, assassinate Anwar Sadat, kill 241 U.S. Marines in Beirut, fly planes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and reestablish a caliphate ruling over an Islamic state in Syria and Iraq, would have seemed like pulp-novel scenarios with probabilities of zero. In fact, nothing of what we regard today as the infrastructure of Islamism was visible at all.

So how did Bernard discern the “return”?

“From the 1970s onward,” he would later write, “to anyone following events in the Muslim world and reading or listening to what Muslims were saying in their own languages, the surge in religious passion was increasingly obvious.” In fact, Bernard was practically the *only* one to whom this was obvious. “The Return of Islam” relied largely on signs that even secular regimes were now justifying themselves in Islamic terms—a sure indication of preemptive worry over a growing trend they must have regarded as a threat to their continued hold on power.

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Not all of Bernard’s proofs were new; careful readers would have encountered some of them in his earlier writings. But it was his bold assertions, reflected in the article’s title, that caught readers off-guard and came to many as a shock. To convey the tenor of his argument, I will

allow him to make it in his own words.

“The Return of Islam” began with a full-scale critique of the way Westerners had failed, time and again, to account for Islam as a *political* factor. From medieval times to the present day, he wrote, the West had shown a “recurring unwillingness to recognize the nature of Islam or even the fact of Islam as an independent, different, and autonomous religious phenomenon.”

To admit that an entire civilization can have religion as its primary loyalty is too much. Even to suggest such a thing is regarded as offensive by liberal opinion, always ready to take protective umbrage on behalf of those whom it regards as its wards. This is reflected in the present inability, political, journalistic, and scholarly alike, to recognize the importance of the factor of religion in the current affairs of the Muslim world and in the consequent recourse [by Western observers] to the language of left-wing and right-wing, progressive and conservative, and the rest of the Western terminology, the use of which in explaining Muslim political phenomena is about as accurate and as enlightening as an account of a cricket match by a baseball correspondent.

Among the “current affairs of the Muslim world” Bernard had in mind was the civil war that had broken out the previous summer in Lebanon. In reporting it, he observed, “the *New York Times* and other lesser newspapers” described Muslims and Druze as “left” and Christians as “right.” Other media reported the war as a clash between the wealthy and the poor. And so forth.

“Occasionally, some small news item might appear to throw doubt on the validity of this picture,” Bernard noted in a follow-up article to his *Commentary* essay in the *New Republic*. There he cited

a report that at the height of the [Lebanese] conflict muezzins called from the minarets of Beirut summoning the faithful to battle for the “leftist” cause; or, more recently, a report that followers of the “leftist” leader Kemal Jumblatt had avenged his death by murdering between 100 and 200 Christian villagers.

The truth was otherwise: the war in Lebanon centered on “the power of religious and communal loyalty,” and left-right political vocabulary was “as enlightening as would be an account of an American presidential elections in terms of tribes and sects.”

Bernard went still farther. Islam wasn’t simply an explanatory factor; it was *the* factor, the essential insight without which the politics of the Middle East became hopelessly opaque:

If, then, we are to understand anything at all about what is happening in the Muslim world at the present time and what has happened in the past, there are two essential points which need to be grasped. One is the universality of religion as a factor in the lives of the Muslim peoples, and the other is its centrality.



Islam manifested this universality and centrality not just in daily life, but in identity and loyalty, the fundamental building blocks of political community. In the *New Republic* piece, Bernard downgraded all other professed identities as manifestly inferior to the religious one:

Religion—rather than country, language, descent, or nationality—has been the primary basis and focus of identity and loyalty, that which distinguishes those who belong to the group and marks them off from others outside the group. The imported Western idea of ethnic and territorial nationhood has had an extraordinary impact; but it remains, like secularism, alien in origin and imperfectly assimilated.

In this light, the future trend was absolutely clear. The imported ideas of nationhood, taken for granted as destined to prevail over time, were beating a retreat. In the *Commentary* essay, Bernard predicted that the Middle East he had known, in which Muslims forced themselves into Western-manufactured categories, would soon be a thing of the past:

Islam is still the most effective form of consensus in Muslim countries, the basic group identity among the masses. This will be increasingly effective as the regimes become more genuinely popular. One can already see the contrast between the present regimes and those of the small, alienated, Western-educated elite which governed until a few decades ago. As regimes come closer to the populace, even if their verbiage is left-wing and ideological, they become more Islamic.

Finally, lest anyone think that this analysis applied only to newer, European-engineered Arab states like Lebanon, Bernard sounded a warning about even those states with distinct identities stretching back to antiquity:

In some countries, such as Turkey, Iran, and Egypt, geography and history have combined to give the inhabitants a special sense of separate identity and destiny, and have advanced them on the path toward secular nationhood. But even in these, Islam remains a significant, elsewhere a major, force. In general, the extent of secularization is less than would at first appear.

It is difficult today, at a time when Islam figures in the title of every other book about the Middle East, to recall just how thoroughly Bernard broke here with conventional wisdom. The whole thrust of Middle Eastern studies, and other social studies of the Middle East, had proclaimed the ever-diminishing salience of Islam in the daily and political lives of Muslims. Modernization theory, still the overarching framework in the American approach to the Middle East, assumed the inevitability of secularization. Nationalism, not Islam, stirred the masses. The future belonged to “revolutionary” movements that had absorbed Western concepts like “class struggle.” For a model of the total assimilation of these concepts, many pointed to the Palestinians, who parroted the slogans of other “liberation” struggles from

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As might be expected, Bernard was pilloried for having reached and retailed his conclusions—both in general and with particular regard to the Palestinians. Leading the charge was Edward Said, who ultimately launched and prosecuted his long-running campaign against Bernard less because of the latter's views on Islam than because of Said's own, pro-PLO views on Israel. Thus, having alleged that, to Bernard, "any political, historical, and scholarly account of Muslims must begin and end with the fact that Muslims are Muslims," Said proceeded to meld this with Bernard's supposed views on the Palestinians. In his influential 1978 manifesto *Orientalism*, Said wrote, in his trademark tone of high sarcasm, "If Arab Palestinians oppose Israeli settlement and occupation of their lands, then that is merely 'the return of Islam.'"

In his campaign, Said also sought to rally secular Arabs and Muslims for whom Bernard's principal offense was to reveal their own dismal failure to modernize the political culture of their countries. If Bernard was right, then Said and the others were abject losers in their own struggle for secularism and against political Islam.

It did not take long for events to vindicate Bernard. He [did not](#) predict the Iranian revolution: "I must confess I never heard of Khomeini. Who had?" But he had flagged such an event as a possibility. And having seen the possibility, he was at an advantage in interpreting its early stages. As the movement gathered steam, confusion reigned about its motives and its leadership. At the time, I was still Bernard's student at Princeton, where Richard Falk, a Princeton professor of international law, was leading an anti-shah campaign based on the premise that Ayatollah Khomeini was merely a figurehead for a genuinely progressive movement. "The depiction of [Khomeini] as fanatical, reactionary, and the bearer of crude prejudices seems certainly and happily false," wrote Falk after an audience with the ayatollah.

Bernard knew otherwise, based on his own careful reading of Khomeini's manifesto, *The Islamic State*. At the time, the document existed only in the original Persian and in an Arabic translation. Bernard retrieved both from the Princeton library and circulated copies on campus and to journalists. From the manifesto, as he later said, "it became perfectly clear who [Khomeini] was and what his aims were. And that all of this talk at the time about [his] being a step forward and a move toward greater freedom was absolute nonsense."

Falk later issued a kind of [mea culpa](#): "Should I have been immediately more suspicious of Ayatollah Khomeini and the Islamic dimensions of the revolution? Probably, but it was not clear at the time." In fact, it was perfectly clear to anyone who did what Bernard did and read the program.

As for Bernard personally, not only did the Iranian revolution constitute the first obvious validation of the “return of Islam” thesis but it marked a big step in his transformation from an academic’s academic into a public sage. “The Iranian Revolution made Washington pay attention to political Islam,” he later observed, “and that attention grew during the 1980s and 1990s. My historical studies suddenly became relevant, and I was called to Washington more frequently to participate in conferences and speak at think tanks.” His mid-1970s move from Britain to America, which had been prompted by personal reasons, proved to have been perfectly timed for political ones.

**In the decades to come,** Islamists launched movement after movement, terrorist act after terrorist act; Bernard published essay after essay, bestseller after bestseller. In 1990, his cover essay on “The Roots of Muslim Rage” in the *Atlantic* relaunched the “clash of civilizations” with, now, special reference to the United States. The hatred emanating from the Islamic world, Bernard repeated, “goes beyond hostility to specific interests or actions or policies or even countries and becomes a rejection of Western civilization as such, not only what it does but what it is, and the principles and values that it practices and professes.”

A decade later came the September 11 attacks. By chance these coincided with the publication of Bernard’s *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response*, followed a year later by *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror*, both books rising to the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list. “Osama bin Laden made me famous,” Bernard wryly noted:

I was interviewed, quoted, filmed and I even made the front page of the *Wall Street Journal*. I remember remarking at the time that if bin Laden claimed a percentage of my royalties for promoting the book, I would have to admit there was some justice in his claim.

All of this left his critics in a state of disbelief. In the academy, the much-idolized Edward Said was thought to have finished him off. At the Middle East Studies Association meeting in 1998, which I attended, Said’s acolytes had joined in a victory lap to mark the twentieth anniversary of *Orientalism*. Now its thesis appeared to have come undone. “Does this mean I’m throwing my copy of *Orientalism* out the window?” quipped Richard Bulliet, a professor of Islamic history at Columbia, in the week following the attacks. “Maybe it does.”

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That was an exceptional admission. If Bernard’s (re)emergence as the preeminent authority

on the region confounded his critics, the old orthodoxies, with minor adjustments, soldiered on, and to this day suspicion of and enmity toward him remain largely unabated: witness the conspicuous failure of the Middle East Studies Association to acknowledge his scholarly contributions by naming him an “honorary fellow.” (Not that he needs it, having been elected a fellow of the half-dozen most significant scholarly academies in Europe and America and holding fifteen honorary doctorates.) By contrast, at a celebratory gala in his honor in New York a few years back, Bernard magnanimously paid tribute to his critics: “Even those, and there are many, who dislike me or disagree with me, or with whom I have disagreed, are generally interesting and sometimes even stimulating, and I am grateful to them too—though not as grateful as I am to friends and admirers.”

#### **IV. The Triumph of Hope**

It would be possible, and it is certainly tempting, to end here in a rhetorical flourish of praise of Bernard for his prescience, courage, and consistency—the historian vindicated by history. But it would also be unfair to him, for it would neglect what remains a principal charge against his well-earned reputation for both judgment and foresight. That charge concerns his support for the 2003 American invasion of Iraq.

Granted, critics will say, Bernard had seen the likes of Khomeini and bin Laden over the horizon. But did he not then fail to anticipate the consequences of a U.S. invasion of Iraq: the sectarian strife, the advantage to Iran, the rise of Islamic State? If he could discern the religious and sectarian character of identity in fragile states like Lebanon, why his optimism about what would follow the fall of Saddam Hussein? By any strict application of his own template, the American attempt to engineer democracy in Iraq could only have been expected to release the genies of radical and sectarian Islam that Saddam had tortured into submission.

To address this critique requires some context. Bernard always radiated supreme confidence, but he never stopped questioning his own premises. It isn’t unusual for scholars to change their views over time, and sometimes even reverse them. Bernard had no such dramatic epiphanies. But he did oscillate over the inevitability of the “clash,” over the primacy of Islam in contemporary Muslim identity, and over the feasibility of democracy in Islam. If he acted as he did on Iraq, it was because over time, on each of these issues, he leaned toward hope.

**If Lewis acted as he did on Iraq, giving his support for the 2003 American invasion, it was because, over time, he had leaned toward hope.**

Sometimes this tendency manifested itself in small emendations, one being so small that I may well be the only one to have detected it. Although Bernard authored and was proud to claim ownership of the phrase “the clash of civilizations,” in a 1994 revision of his classic 1964 book *The Middle East and the West*, the word “clash” became “encounter.” When I asked him about the substitution, he said he’d decided “clash” was “too harsh.” This was just after Samuel Huntington had popularized the idea, and I can only surmise that Bernard had heeded the criticism of it, and especially the caveat [issued](#) by his friend and admirer, the late Fouad Ajami: “Huntington is wrong. He has underestimated the tenacity of modernity and secularism.” Although Bernard did not abandon or disavow his guiding concept, he continued to interrogate it. (Ajami, for his part, later [admitted](#) that Huntington had been right.)

Another example: as we have seen, the key to Bernard’s explanation for the intensity of the “clash” was his insight that the seemingly endless rivalry between Islam and the West was a family feud—fueled precisely by resemblances, not differences. In that light, consider now an unexpected passage at the very close of a 2003 [article](#) reiterating this thesis:

The clash between these two religiously defined civilizations results not only from their differences but also from their resemblances—and *in these there may even be some hope for better future understanding* [emphasis added].

What, we must ask, explained this sudden hope that a pattern of hostile relations, established 1,400 years ago, might yet be broken—and for the very same reason that, in Bernard’s well-known view, it had remained *unbroken*?

Then there was the matter of loyalty to the state. In “The Return of Islam,” Bernard had argued that such loyalty hadn’t taken firm root in the newer Arab states, and that Islam was eroding it even in the older nations of Iran, Turkey, and Egypt. Religion remained “the primary basis and focus of identity and loyalty.” But, in 1989, inspired by the fact that Iraqi Shiites had fought against their Iranian co-sectarians right through the eight-year Iran-Iraq war, he reached another [conclusion](#):

All over the Middle East, not only in the old nations like Iran and Egypt, but even in some of the newest and most artificial, the state—the ganglion of interrelated, interacting interests and loyalties at the center of coercive power—is once again becoming the primary focus of political loyalty and identity.

Finally, the question of democracy. As a young man, Bernard had maintained that democracy held no appeal for Muslims; and in the early years of the cold war, he went so far as to argue that if forced to choose between democracy and Communism, Muslims would probably choose the latter. In an [article](#) published in 1954, he declared democracy to be “the most difficult form of government to operate, requiring certain qualities of mind and habit, of institution and tradition, perhaps even of climate, for its effective working.” The Muslims had none of these—in most cases, not even the climate. He thus declared himself, regretfully, “by

no means certain that parliamentary democracy represents the common destiny of mankind.” While he did not “exclude the possibility” of its spread to the Islamic world, “I wish to make clear my view that in large areas of the Islamic world this consummation is not in prospect.”

But that view, too, oscillated over the decades, and by the early 1990s his position had shifted. In an [article](#) on “Islam and Liberal Democracy” published in 1993, after restating the same list of impediments to democratization, he wrote the following: “The democratic ideal is steadily gaining force in the region, and increasing numbers of Arabs have come to the conclusion that it is the best, perhaps the only, hope for the solution of their economic, social, and political problems.” Yes, he would [say](#) in an oft-repeated metaphor, “democracy is a strong medicine, which must be administered in small and only gradually increased doses. Too large and too sudden a dose can kill the patient.” But while “the prospects for Middle Eastern democracy are not good, they are better than they have ever been before.”

What, to repeat, explains these subtle but significant recalibrations? To be persuaded by hope is a particularly American characteristic, and in that respect such reassessments were sure evidence of Bernard’s assimilation to his adopted country. If the “clash” concept was inspired by Europe’s experience of Islam, a saga of centuries of conflict and friction on a hostile frontier, the “hope” was informed by the 20th-century triumph of the United States in ending conflict and blurring frontiers—and in particular by America’s decisive role in two great victories over tyranny. As a mature man, Bernard had experienced and witnessed how the liberal democracies vanquished Nazism and transformed Germany and Japan into democracies, and then how the West’s long cold war against the Soviet Union had been brought to a successful end.

“Every historian must inevitably be influenced by the events of his time,” Bernard wrote. In 1954, he had lamented “the unfortunate and unpalatable fact . . . that authoritarian and not representative government approximates most closely to the common experience of mankind.” Forty years later, thanks to an incredible transformation of world politics, that reality had been overturned, leaving the Islamic world as the last holdout (save China) against freedom’s progress. Could it really be the case that Muslims, almost alone, had the will and the power to resist change? Could he be *that* certain?

Bernard, then, didn’t strictly apply his own template. Edward Said had purported to encapsulate Bernard’s view in the sardonic words I quoted earlier: “Any political, historical, and scholarly account of Muslims must begin and end with the fact that Muslims are Muslims.” Said was wrong. Begin, yes: Bernard did begin with just that fact, and each of his essays on the Muslim “mood” opened with an erudite exposition of Islam’s civilizational legacy. But his account didn’t necessarily always end there, because, by reading and listening to contemporary sources, he sought to place the Middle East within history’s broad trends. If, ultimately, he came down on the side of hope, it is no small irony that his critics should have faulted him for finally seeing the Arabs as ready for transformation when for so long the same



fault-finders had condemned him for claiming they were not.

In believing that Iraq could become the vector of an Arab democratic transformation, Bernard misplaced his hope. But in reading this passage from an [essay](#) he wrote in 2009, entitled “Free at Last? The Arab World in the 21st Century,” one must bear in mind the events that, only two years later, would bring down the rulers of Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt:

The regimes that depend on obedience are European-style dictatorships that use techniques of control and enforcement derived from the fascist and Communist models. . . . These regimes have little or no claim to the loyalty of their people and depend for survival on diversion and repression. . . . In those Arab countries where the government depends on force rather than loyalty, there is clear evidence of deep and widespread discontent, directed primarily against the regime and then inevitably against those who are seen to support it. . . . These models are becoming less effective; there are groups, increasing in number and importance, that seek a new form of government based not primarily on loyalty, and still less on repression, but on consent and participation. These groups are still small and, of necessity, quiet, but the fact that they have appeared at all is a remarkable development.

This is about as close as any expert came to anticipating the “Arab Spring.” (And most [did not](#) come close at all.) Moreover, in an interview after the Arab Spring began, when Western enthusiasm still ran high, Bernard [warned](#) that it might be hijacked by Islamists. For a ninety-three-year-old man, restricted in his ability to travel through the region, relying on fragmentary information but drawing upon his own prodigious intellect, this was a bold assessment—and, once again, a prescient one.

## **V. Our Great Fortune**

“Over the course of my life I have watched the world of Islam shift from the realm of musty archives and academic conferences to the evening news.” Actually, this occurred not over the course of Bernard’s life but over the lesser part of it, after Iran’s revolution, when he was sixty-two, and especially after September 11, when he was eighty-five. In April 2003, shortly before his eighty-seventh birthday, he had two simultaneous number-one bestsellers on the *New York Times* non-fiction list, one in hardcover, the other in paperback.

To celebrate Bernard’s 100th birthday, then, is to thank God, or good living, or genetics, or luck, not only for his extraordinary longevity but for the robust health he has enjoyed. During his sojourn on American soil, what might have been only a brief final chapter in a distinguished scholarly career turned into an entire library of just-in-time public

contributions for which he proved to be precisely the right man at the right moment. So many who constituted the small “alternative” school of Middle Eastern studies departed too soon: Elie Kedourie, Fouad Ajami, P.J. (Taki) Vatikiotis, and Barry Rubin were all lost before the age of seventy. Bernard’s extraordinary run has been compensation and consolation, and while he has no true successors, his influence is everywhere apparent across the study of Islamism and jihadism, al-Qaeda and Islamic State, and in every assessment of the “return” and the “clash.”

**While Lewis has no true successors, his influence is everywhere apparent across the study of Islamism and jihadism, al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, and in every assessment of the “return” and the “clash.”**

Bernard today resides in a Jewish assisted-living facility in New Jersey. Although he no longer writes or speaks in public, he is in good health and humor. At the New York gala in his honor, Bernard said these words:

There is a common Israeli phrase when offering birthday greetings to the elderly, to say *ad meah v'esrim*, “to a hundred and twenty.” Sometimes nowadays they modify it by changing one Hebrew consonant and saying *ad meah k'esrim*, “to a hundred like twenty,” which I think on the whole is a more attractive proposition. I am approaching that rapidly. I have been in my long life, and remain, very fortunate.

Bernard has come closer than just about anyone to fulfilling the “more attractive [Israeli] proposition.” To mark his new status as a centenarian, I would similarly propose a different toast from the traditional one: may he live to see democracy realized in the Muslim Middle East. To some, this might seem like a wish for life eternal. Bernard would disagree, but even he allows that it will take some time. Until then, may he be blessed with continuing good health and fortune, and may we never cease appraising the legacy of this irreplaceable man.

## THE MASTER HISTORIAN OF THE MIDDLE EAST

**An entire syllabus on the history of the Middle East could be compiled from the writings of Bernard Lewis. It will be a long time before the field will see another genius of his caliber.**

June 27, 2016 | Martin Kramer

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**This is a response to *The Return of Bernard Lewis*, originally published in *Mosaic* in June 2016**

It is gratifying that my [essay](#) in *Mosaic* should have prompted such moving tributes to Bernard Lewis from Robert Irwin, Itamar Rabinovich, Eric Ormsby, and Amir Taheri: distinguished scholars and writers whose friendships with him span many decades. And they are but a few of the many admirers who would have eagerly answered *Mosaic's* call.



*Books by Bernard Lewis.* Martin Kramer.

This is all the more remarkable given that Lewis's own contemporaries are gone. If Bernard is so beloved today by so many, it is because he readily assumed the role of a mentor to the young. I was a case in point, having first enrolled in Bernard's class at Princeton as a twenty-two-year-old graduate student. He was then sixty, almost two full generations older, but within a month he had set me up with an assistantship, giving me a key to his office at the Institute for Advanced Study and tasking me with cataloguing incoming scholarly offprints. There, working after hours and on weekends, I would sit at his desk, marveling at the sheer volume and variety of the incoming mail and catching glimpses of the correspondence of a scholar with a global reputation.

Every few weeks, Bernard would invite me to lunch at the Institute, followed by a vigorous walk in its surrounding woods. Then would come the high point. Choosing a shelf in his massive library, he would go through it one book at a time, estimating each tome's significance to scholarship, sharing some lore (or was it gossip?) about its author, and parsing the dedication. I recall his taking up a book by Maxime Rodinson, the French former Communist and scholar of Islam whose political opinions were polar opposites to his. Rodinson had inscribed a warm and affectionate dedication. "He's a scoundrel," Bernard said with a twinkle in his eye. "But I like him."

Such gifts of precious time were hardly mine alone. Over the years, I heard many similar stories from other students, dispelling any illusion that I was especially privileged. (Still, less than two years after we met, he traveled from Princeton to Washington to attend my wedding, and in a fluent Hebrew hand signed the wedding contract as a witness.) His generosity to students and younger scholars assured him a devoted personal following over the course of several generations.

**It is fitting** that Robert Irwin's was the first [response](#) to my essay. Irwin studied under Bernard at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London, at a time when that school enjoyed a reputation as the mecca of scholarship on the Middle East and Islam. Irwin's *Dangerous Knowledge*, a brilliant [account](#) of the history of Orientalism, offers an erudite and thorough validation of Bernard's own defense of the great scholarly tradition of Orientalism against ignorant defamers, of whom Edward Said was the slickest.

Irwin confirms my judgment that Bernard proved singularly prescient when it came to the "return of Islam," although he believes that the record of Middle East experts in predicting outcomes isn't particularly distinguished—and that in any case prediction isn't part of a historian's job description.

About this, I think Bernard would agree—up to a point. In his [memoirs](#), he explained his view of what a historian could contribute to prognostication:

I don't think the historian can reasonably be expected to predict the future but there are certain things that the historian can and should do. He can discern trends. He can look at what has been happening and what is happening and see change developing. From this he can formulate, I will not say predictions, but possibilities, alternative possibilities, things that may happen, things that may go this way or that way, in evolving interactions.

This is precisely what Lewis did in his 1976 *Commentary* [article](#), "The Return of Islam," which was not so much a prediction as a projection of a discerned trend. Moreover, it was a trend that Bernard had identified even earlier when he insisted that the victory of secular

nationalism over Islamic identity might not be as total as some observers believed. Consider, for example, this passage from *The Middle East and the West*, published in 1964 at the crest of Nasserism and pan-Arab nationalism, and at the lowest ebb of the Muslim Brotherhood:

In recent years, these militant religious organizations appear to have lost ground, and in many countries they have been outlawed or restricted. There can be little doubt, however, that they continue to work in secret, or that they respond to the mood and desires of a great many people among the submerged classes in Islamic society. Even the governments, however modern and secular, have often found it useful or expedient to take account of Islamic sentiments and loyalties.

True, Bernard noted, the Muslim Brotherhood had been suppressed by Nasser in Egypt, but even there “it is by no means extinct.” And then he concluded with this striking passage:

This much is obvious. Of all the great movements that have shaken the Middle East during the last century and a half, the Islamic movements alone are authentically Middle Eastern in inspiration. Liberalism and fascism, patriotism and nationalism, communism and socialism, are all European in origin, however much adapted and transformed by Middle Eastern disciples. The religious orders alone spring from the native soil, and express the passions of the submerged masses of the population. Though they have all, so far, been defeated, they have not yet spoken their last word.

It must be remembered that only six years earlier, Daniel Lerner had published *The Passing of Traditional Society: The Modernization of the Middle East*, a staple of American syllabi for a generation. There Lerner announced that “what the West is, the Middle East seeks to become.” Only two years before Lewis’s book, similarly, Albert Hourani had published his *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, assigned reading in every class, arguing that the impact of Western ideas on Muslim identity had been profound and irreversible. Lewis dissented. When he wrote his 1976 article, it wasn’t to declare that Islam had “returned” from oblivion. Rather, it had never been abandoned by the “submerged classes” and “submerged masses” for whom the ideological acrobatics of the would-be “modernizers” were incomprehensible and irrelevant.

How is it that Bernard saw beneath the surface, while Lerner, Hourani, and later Said barely managed to scratch it? Those with a shallow understanding of Islam’s classical and medieval tradition might imagine its legacy swiftly dissipating. For Lewis, as steeped in the study of the same tradition as any learned Muslim, the idea that the masses might throw this tradition overboard at the whim of a few “modernizers” seemed preposterous.

In 1999, in a series explicitly named “Predictions,” Bernard published a slim [book](#) entitled *The Future of the Middle East*. Again, these were not so much predictions as trend-projections. But one of them broke with the consensus, and might well be considered his parting prediction.



There Lewis expressed doubt about the staying power of the United States in the Middle East, and the willingness of Europe to take up the slack. But this did not necessarily mean that the Middle East would become, or would remain, a great-power vacuum:

For the moment Russia, crippled by its internal problems, is out of the game. . . . But there can be no doubt that at some time in the near or distant future this will change. A country with the resources and numbers and the scientific and technological sophistication of Russia will not indefinitely remain on the sidelines. Sooner or later Russia will be back, and we do not know what kind of Russia it will be. It may fall subject to some form of totalitarian tyranny, fascist or Communist; it may resume its earlier role as the leader of pan-Slavism or of Orthodox Christianity; it may succeed, after so many failed efforts, in establishing a Russian liberal democracy. It may resume or reject its former imperial ambitions. But this much can be said with certainty: whatever kind of regime rules in a resurgent Russia, it will be vitally concerned with the Middle East—a region not far from its southern frontier, wherever that may ultimately lie, and linked by ties of history, religion, and culture with important elements of the Russian population, including both Jews and Muslims as well as Christians.

“No doubt,” “sooner or later,” “with certainty”: Bernard didn’t hedge this prediction, which flew straight in the face of conventional wisdom but drew on a deep understanding of Russia’s past role in the Middle East, and its complex historical interaction with the Islamic world. Most experts today have been caught off-balance by Vladimir Putin’s bold chess move in Syria. Bernard Lewis isn’t among them.

**Itamar Rabinovich** is too modest. In his [discussion](#) of Bernard’s attachment to Israel and Zionist convictions, Rabinovich fails to underline his own decisive role in bringing him around.

True, everything in Bernard’s personal formation pulled him toward Israel; but everything in his professional world pulled him away. Until the June 1967 Six-Day War, he was circumspect in expressing his personal views about Israel in the Middle East. After the war he became more forthcoming, and was positively liberated after relocating to the United States in the early 1970s. But it was Itamar, a master mentor in his own right, who bound Bernard to Israel by affiliating him with Tel Aviv University. Bernard’s preference for this still-young institution added hugely to its prestige, at a time when it still struggled in the shadow of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Bernard wished for peace between Israel and its neighbors, and Rabinovich in his response tells how Bernard brought news of Anwar Sadat’s eagerness for peace to a doubtful Golda Meir, then Israel’s prime minister. Had she heeded him, perhaps Israel might have been



spared the trauma of the October 1973 Yom Kippur War. Or perhaps not: counterfactual history is always open to dispute.

But an indication of Bernard's integrity arises from a "peace" agreement that did come to pass—namely, the deal between Yitzhak Rabin and Yasir Arafat, signed on the White House lawn on September 13, 1993. In his [report](#) of that event in the *New York Times*, Thomas Friedman called it "a triumph of hope over history." When torn between hope and history, as I sought to demonstrate in my *Mosaic* essay, Bernard sometimes privileged hope. He was among the 3,000 guests on the lawn that day, and he let the excitement carry him away. The handshake between Rabin and Arafat, he would recall in his memoirs, "was truly wonderful."

But no less remarkable, I would submit, was his later frank admission that it had been a mistake. In January 2002, an Israeli journalist asked him whether he hadn't once held out hope for the now-ruined Oslo process. "You are correct," Bernard answered. So was he wrong? "Unfortunately, I must admit that I was wrong. . . . The idea of bringing Arafat from Tunis was mistaken." Bernard then explained why this was so, by reference to the long Palestinian history of miscalculation and rejection.

Of course, he had known all of this history before the agreement, and had even written it up in another [article](#) for *Commentary*, "The Palestinians and the PLO: A Historical Approach" (January 1975). "The PLO," Bernard wrote there, "refuses to recognize the existence of Israel, and makes little serious attempt to disguise its intention of using any West Bank state of which it may obtain control as a first step toward the realization of its aim—the liquidation of Israel and its replacement by a Palestine state."

To support the Oslo agreement, then, Bernard had to discount the very history he had written. What was remarkable was his readiness to admit his mistake. Here was the world's foremost authority on the Middle East, confessing to an erroneous assessment of a matter well within his broad competence. Has a single one of Lewis's critics made a comparable confession over misplaced hope?

**Eric Ormsby** is a man of letters who shares with Bernard Lewis an appreciation of Islamic sects, fine poetry, and the fecundity of the English language. He is right to [emphasize](#) Bernard's elegant and precise prose, inspired by the illustrious tradition of English historical writing. Indeed, Bernard has remained monogamous in his love of English and what he has celebrated as its "glorious anarchy." He could have lectured in a half-dozen languages, and did lecture in French and Turkish when formal protocol demanded it. But he was never one to flaunt his versatility in languages at the expense of precision. "It is only in my mother tongue," he wrote in his memoirs, "that I can say exactly what I want to say, and in the way I want to say it. In any other language I am restricted and constrained by the limitation of the words and idioms available to me."

In Israel, many of the older attendees at his lectures used to tell me that they came not only to learn about the advertised topic but for the guilty pleasure of listening to Bernard's refined speech, which reminded them of their younger years when Palestine conducted its business in the King's English. While his rise to late-life bestsellerdom depended upon timing, he achieved it no less by virtue of his fluid and flawless English style. (If Bernard had one complaint about his American readers, it was their lack of appreciation for British irony, in which he reveled.)

As Buntzie Churchill, Bernard's companion, has reminded me, Bernard deliberately disciplined himself to lecture without notes, or else from a single notecard with a few scribbled words. This mastery of extemporaneous speech dramatically accelerated his output after he acquired a dictation device and a budget for transcription. He wrote *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (1961) in longhand. But by the time I met him, in 1976, he was dictating virtually everything. He would stack up the books and articles he needed for a session, mark the relevant pages with bits of paper, and jot down a few words to remind him of the direction he wished to go in. The verbatim transcription would be a perfectly crafted and finished product requiring only minor emendations. This feat demanded a range of competencies that few scholars possess, and goes far to explain how he managed, in "retirement," to belt out a book every year.

**In my student days**, when I spent hours as Bernard's office assistant, I would be amazed by the tide of articles and books sent to him by Middle Eastern scholars, all bearing admiring dedications. Amir Taheri does well to [remind](#) us of the profound respect for Bernard among serious scholars from the Middle East in the period before Edward Said published his vicious caricature of Orientalism.

Said sought to portray Bernard as disconnected from the Arabs. "Lewis hasn't set foot in the Middle East, in the Arab world, for at least 40 years," he [announced](#) in 2003. It was a characteristic fabrication: in that time frame, Lewis was a frequent if not annual visitor to Cairo and Amman. (I myself saw him in Cairo in 1979, when I was researching my thesis.) More importantly, Bernard had an array of Arab followers and friends who believed, like Taheri, that "Lewis criticized us because he respected us and, perhaps, even loved us a bit." A worthy project for an article or thesis would be to go through Lewis's correspondence and library to map his Middle Eastern networks in full.

On this centenary, one of those admiring voices is lamentably silent. Fouad Ajami, a self-described disciple of Bernard's, wrote a marvelous [encomium](#) a decade ago on Bernard's ninetieth birthday, and delivered the main [tribute](#) at a Tel Aviv University gala thrown for his ninety-sixth. It would take much more space than I have to explore all the aspects of Bernard's relationship with Ajami (who was also one of my first teachers). Suffice it to say that Fouad exemplified the near-awe with which many Arabs and Muslims regarded Bernard, and himself

testified to

the deep reservoirs of reverence felt for [Lewis] in many Muslim and Arab lands. . . . Countless Arab and Iranian and Turkish readers recognize their tormented civilization in what he has written. They know that he has not come to the material of their history driven by bad faith, or by a desire for dominion. They take him at his word, a man of the Anglo-Saxon world, convinced that the ways of the West today carry with them the hopes of other civilizations.

Two summers ago, Fouad passed away at the age of sixty-eight. Had he been with us to offer another tribute on this occasion, it would have surpassed all others; instead, we can only revisit his earlier ones, and mourn the tragedy of a disciple predeceasing his master.

**An entire syllabus** on the history of the Middle East since the advent of Islam could be compiled exclusively from the writings of Bernard Lewis. (And, so numerous are the translations of his works, it could be done in several languages.) In this respect, he towers above all of his contemporaries and successors and arguably also over his famed Orientalist predecessors, none of whom was trained as a historian. It will be a long time, perhaps generations, before the study of Islam and the Middle East will invite and admit another genius of his caliber.

In the meantime, we have his classic works to guide us through this dark age of obfuscation. There can be no better way to mark Bernard's centenary than to reread his essays, fill the gaps on one's shelf of his many books, and revisit his most timeless insights in the light of current events. On his centenary, let us pay homage and offer thanks for the good fortune that has given him to us in such abundance.